

BEFORE THERE WERE PERFINS

by Vojtech Maxa

Ever since postage stamps were introduced, business firms have been trying to figure out ways to keep them from being pilfered by employees. One penny or its equivalent was at one time enough to tempt office boys to pinch the stamps and resell them. Joseph Sloper of England understood this situation well and it was this concern for preventing illegal use of postage stamps that led him to invent the postage stamp perforating machine.

But Sloper did not perfect his machine until 1868 -- and the problem of pilfering postage stamps was around before then. Various methods other than perforating were tried before Sloper came up with his invention.

Austrian Approach

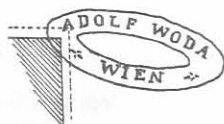
Postage stamps were first used in Austria in 1850 and Austrian businessmen soon found that their office boys were as sticky fingered as their English counterparts. It might be said that the Austrians were even a little more cunning, since German thoroughness was a bit more difficult to circumvent than English business practices.

Since most of the loss was traced to the practice of removing stamps from letters which were being taken to the post office, the Austrians came up with the idea of using a rubber stamp to obliterate a corner of the stamp after it had been affixed to the letter.

Other businessmen, perhaps with a smaller volume of mail, simply instructed employees to stamp envelopes before addressing them and then ensure that some part of the address -- the flowery capital letters perhaps -- extended onto a corner of the stamp to effectively "tie" the stamp to the envelope.

I have an example of the rubber-stamp method in my collection. It is on a letter dated February 9, 1858, mailed from Vienna to Brno in Moravia bearing a 6-kruzeer stamp. The neat blue oval handstamp shown in Figure 1 ties the stamp to the cover.

Fig.
1



Post Office Position

This practice of using rubber stamps or pen endorsements to tie the stamps to the cover surely was going on for some time before 1860, but it was only in 1860 that the Austrian Ministry of Trade (the responsible agency for postal affairs) stepped in to regulate the practice.

In a decree dated May 30, 1860, and published in the June 18, 1860, Postal Gazette, authorities noted the practice of writing part of the address over stamps to prevent

their unauthorized removal. The authorities informed postmasters that the practice was legal and that such letters should be handled in the normal manner. It is likely that the public was informed of this decree through the media of the day.

But the users of the rubber-stamp method of protecting stamps kept on using their rubber stamps. Obviously it was much easier for them, and it was safer since re-using a stamp with a couple of pen lines was easier than trying to re-use one with part of a rubber-stamp mark on it.

As a result, on April 11, 1863, the Postal Gazette carried another note to postmasters. It reiterated the decree of May 30, 1860, did authorize the overwriting of stamps but not the use of rubber handstamps. Postmasters were instructed to treat letters with rubber-stamp endorsements as unstamped and deal with them accordingly.

Enter Sloper

Just what happened in the next few years is not known for sure. But we do know that when Joseph Sloper made his continental tour in the early 1870's to sell his perforator, he met with great sympathy in Austria.

As I have already shown in my article on Sloper in Austria (November/December 1972 *Bulletin*), at least one firm ordered a perforator from Sloper then. That firm was Paget & Company of Vienna, manufacturers of various articles from rubber and rubberized cloth. The Paget Perfin (Figure 2) carries the distinctive Sloper ampersand.

Fig.
2



Officially, the postal authorities authorized the use of Perfins on April 4, 1877, and on July 2, 1886, the use of Perfin on postal stationery was officially authorized also. Not surprisingly, postal officials were a little behind. A friend of mine, a Czech collector of Austrian cancellations, has shown me a post card with the Paget Perfin which is dated January 25, 1881. It was mailed from Vienna and addressed to the Czech town of Policka.

It should be noted that the Austrian postal officials were not the only ones to be somewhat behind. Swiss officials authorized the use of Perfins as of April 22, 1876, but the earliest known Swiss Perfin, an SBS used by the Zurich Credit Bank, was used at least as early as December 28, 1874. Similarly the first Swedish Perfin was used in 1887: C.L./G. used by Carl Larson of Goteborg. The Swedish government did not officially authorize the use of Perfins until September 9, 1907. It should be noted that Larson was the

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only firm in Sweden using Perfins during this period.

Perfins and their relationship to other forms of security endorsement are a fertile field for the specialist who is not afraid to dig for details in some unpromising places. There is much information available about Perfins, but there is still much more to learn and record for the benefit of other collectors.